

Whose Image Do You Bear?

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Matthew 22:15-22 ~ October 18, 2020

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's. O God, help us always to render unto you that which is yours. Amen.

Feeling afraid and having a common enemy can create unlikely partnerships. I am talking about the partnership between those who plotted to entrap Jesus: the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were the leaders of the Jews, leaders of the Temple; official representatives of what was in effect the state religion. The Herodians were, literally, Herod's people. Herod was the dynastic ruler of Jewish Palestine; his authority came from Rome. The Herodians were the leaders of the state. Thus, in this scenario, religious and secular authority combine forces. Both institutions insist upon unwavering allegiance. Both institutions are interested in the coinage of the day. For both institutions levy taxes upon the people: state tax and temple tax. To whom is it due?

Thus, this passage is not – as so frequently interpreted – about the divide between church and state, or our allegiance thereto. Frankly, I don't think Jesus had much interest in either institution, except insofar as they could be either hindrance or pathway to a right relationship with God.

Unfortunately for me, this means that just as I cannot use this text as an opportunity to rail against the corruptness of the secular state, neither can I use it as an opportunity for soliciting your generous support of the institutional church. It would not be appropriate for me to mention here just how important it is for each and every one of us to give generously, with grateful hearts, out of our abundance, for the mission of the spread of the Gospel and the work of St. Columba's as a community. As a priest of the church and thus a Pharisee of sorts, you might rightly hear these words as suspect; I, no better than my forbears doing what I must to ensure your allegiance and fulfillment of the temple tax. This – despite the fact that so many of you, filled with the Holy Spirit, are striving to nurture a community of Christ that is truly living God's love.

So if the point is neither “church versus state,” nor “support of the church,” what then?

Jesus asked them to bring a coin. Looking at it, he asked them “whose head is this? whose likeness? whose image does it bear?” Image: the word is important. In Greek it is the word icon. Icon is the term used in the book of Genesis, in creation, when God says “let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” “So God created humankind in God's icon, in the image of God he created them; male and female God created them.”

The way Christ puts the question, “Whose image is this?” immediately prompts a second, deeper question: “Whose image do you bear?” The image of God.

The coin, with Caesar's image, belongs to Caesar; pay your taxes with it. You, in God's image, belong to God; render unto God what is God's. Give your self to God.

Those who had determined to entrap were now amazed – not by his cleverness – but by the way Jesus moved through the externalities, the chaff, and got to the core, the essence. It was foretold by the prophet Isaiah (45:1-7): ‘I will subdue nations, strip kings of their robes, break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron; I will give you the treasures of

darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, who call you by your name.’

There are these days so many calls upon our allegiance, so many good and right causes with which to align, so many obligations from within and without placed upon us. I won’t speak for you, but I’m fairly driven – to be conscientious and responsible, to do right by people, to stand on the right side of justice, to fulfill my obligations. In many ways this is a good thing; I am grateful. But too often I find myself caught, in a cycle, spinning faster and harder; a cycle of requisites and responsibilities.

“Of course!” you say. “It’s October. It’s election season with a nation on the brink. We live in the capital; we’re committed to doing right. We have kids, parents, jobs. We’re designed, wired this way. Citizens of state and church. And, by golly, trying to be good to boot!”

The demands continue unabated: What do you owe, and to whom? Where do you have to be? When? What do you have to produce? For whom? Get on it. A world of commitment and obligation. These are the concerns of the Pharisees and Herodians, of those who keep track and levy taxes and make sure that we not neglect even one of our obligations.

Where then is the mystery, the beauty, the holiness, the heart, and the love?

I don’t care about your obligations; render those to Caesar.

I care about you, your desire. (That’s what Jesus says.) I care about the desire of your heart; your desire *for* love, *to be* loved; your desire *to be loving*; your desire for God. Whose image do you bear?

I’m no mystic. I’m no monk. But I know hunger, and desire deep inside, drawing me forth, in search of you: my God, the lover of souls.

I found a poem, a love poem, by Meister Eckhart, a 13th century mystic:

How long can the moth flirt
near the mouth of the flame before their lip’s touch
and the moth’s soul
becomes like a sun.

And does the moth then die? No.
In serving God one is transformed into Him.

What lovers would [not] return to us,
what lovers would not unite beyond belief and annihilate
their separation forever
if they had the power to do so?

That power our Lord has. How long do you think
you can just flirt with Him
before you dissolve in ecstasy?

Existence spins on His potter’s wheel;
all is being shaped into the Divine.

What lovers would
not want to die
embraced?

My spiritual director years ago used to remind me, Christ has never lived as Ledlie before. Each morning a new dawn, each day a new opportunity to live for the very first time as you as the embodiment of Christ in this world. Christ has never lived as you – until now.

C.S. Lewis observed, “There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal.” I suppose that goes for the one you meet in the mirror each day.

Dear ones, do not delay. The day is bright, our lifetime a mere flash of light in the sun. So, said Merton, “Wake up and dance in the clarity of perfect contradiction.”

We live with Caesar. Rest assured, Caesar will have his due. We also live with God. God will not tax us, nor even direct us. This is not God’s way. Rather, God awakens and woos us, as a lover in the night. Whose icon do you bear? Whose image do you share?

I close with another love poem, by St. Catherine of Siena:

“I won’t take no for an answer,”
God began to say
to me
when He opened His arms each night
wanting us to
dance.

May you heed the desire of your heart and render unto God that which is God’s. Amen.

The poems by Meister Eckhart and Catherine of Siena were found in: *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky, Penguin Compass, 2002. The C.S. Lewis quote is from *The Weight of Glory* and the Thomas Merton quote is from *Raids on the Unspeakable*.